

## Some Reason in Madness

Senior Paper


Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Literature at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville

~~Spring 2016~~  
Spring 2016

By Wade Overly



Thesis Director  
Anne Jansen

  
A curved arrow points from the signature of Anne Jansen down to the signature of Katherine Min.

Thesis Advisor  
Katherine Min

Wade Overly

Prof. Min

LANG 494

25 April 2016

### Some Reason in Madness

It seemed so simple to Uriel when it all started. GOD gave its angels instructions, and he, Lucifer, Gabriel, and Michael would organize everyone to follow the instructions. Sure, it had been a bit messy at first. Even with trillions of angels working non-stop, creating the entire universe in six days wasn't exactly an easy task. And yeah, they had pretty much run out of animal ideas by day four, but Lucifer just started pushing out as many random animal concepts as she could until they met their quota. Uriel was still shocked that the platypus did as well as it had.

It was unfortunate that they hid so many unviable animals under the earth's surface before they figured out how to use GOD's delete function. But in the end they had done it! The booted it up and UNIVERSE.god worked. The weird hairless apes that GOD's instructions had been so insistent on were walking around, and eating fruit just like they were supposed to.

UNIVERSE.god still had its hiccups and glitches. UNIVERSE 1.0 wasn't very well optimized, so occasionally the frame rate would drop drastically and scare all of the hairless apes, but Universe 1.1 ran at a smooth sixty frames-per-second. Yeah, they

still couldn't figure out why a camel would step on a rock at a weird angle and go flying into the atmosphere, but at least they didn't have any more major disasters like when they accidentally removed the hard-cap on how many rabbits could occupy a square foot of space and crashed GOD's server. Then it all went wrong.

For some reason GOD's instructions had insisted on a single tree near the hairless apes' original spawn point. For whatever reason, the apes were not allowed to eat fruit from off that tree. The request hadn't made sense at the time, but whatever, Uriel just had his team put an invisible wall around the tree and that should have been the last time he had to think about it. But somehow, one of the Apes must have glitched through the wall and gotten to the fruit, and suddenly they had started doing things they were never programmed to do like building houses, wearing animal skins, and masturbating.

After that things fell apart. Lucifer wanted to scrap the current batch of humans because they weren't in line with her creative vision. Uriel had disagreed and pointed out that GOD's instructions said specifically not to touch the humans after UNIVERSE was activated. Michael took Uriel's side, and passionately argued with Lucifer until Gabriel left the room in tears. Before Uriel knew what was happening, and before he could finish explaining to Michael what exactly he was arguing for, Lucifer had decided that Heaven was too stifling. She took her entire division, any other angels that would follow her, and the Omega key, and left. Michael declared that Lucifer was a threat to

Heaven and GOD, and promptly formed a military to make sure that neither she nor any of her new “demons” could get back in. Uriel didn’t remember what he was doing when all of this happened, but every time he tried he got a pounding headache.

Of course Uriel was left in charge of everything. Michael got far too wrapped up in preparing for, as he put it, “the inevitable battle between Heaven and Hell.” Gabriel said that she wasn’t coming back until everyone had stopped fighting, and GOD hadn’t given a single instruction since they had booted UNIVERSE. Uriel tried everything to get creation back to order. Peace talks broke down, compromises were rejected, and Michael and Lucifer flatly refused to wear a comically oversized shirt together. Finally he got them to agree to flood the earth and fix all the humans in a dimensional pocket called Purgatory. GOD’s instructions said they couldn’t delete the humans, they didn’t say anything about creating a lot of water and dropping it on the humans all at once. It was a great plan, except for the part where it didn’t work.

It took grueling centuries of work to figure out what went wrong with the humans and even longer to fix it. But on the verge of initiating the final patch, Uriel got a report that not only had some humans survived and repopulated the earth, but an Angel and a Demon had gone missing. Michael and Lucifer naturally blamed each other for this. Uriel only groaned when he found out which Demon was missing. Eventually he motioned to hold an extended sabbatical so that he could think. And then, only five centuries into everyone’s vacation, it happened.

It was the reason why Uriel was standing on earth, at a street corner, walking into a small café in Vienna. He had said that he would meet Uriel here, and despite many, many eccentricities he usually showed up when Uriel needed him. Uriel, his long white hair slicked back with immaculate precision, moved to the back of the restaurant, only noticing the bustle around him to admire the quaint little world the humans had built. A tall man in a black thousand-dollar suit waved Uriel over to his booth.

“So,” said the man as Uriel sat down, “what seems to be the trouble?”

“The Alpha key is missing,” Uriel said.

“Have you tried checking the couch cushions?” the tall man asked. “That’s where my keys usually end up.”

Uriel gave the man a flat look, and as he did the man broke into a wide smile full of terrifyingly sharp teeth.

“Could you at least try to take this seriously?” Uriel said.

“I am taking this seriously,” the tall man said as he bounced his leg under the table. “Without the Alpha, GOD is even more of a useless hunk of hardware than he usually is.”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about.”

“Then why are we...?” said the man, gesturing as if to indicate the entirety of existence.

"Michael is blaming Lucifer--"

"How unexpected of him!"

"And he says that if the Alpha isn't returned he is going to declare war on Hell."

The tall man's jagged smile fell. "Oh," he said.

"Lucifer is denying everything, but we are still investigating."

"Let me guess," the man said, smile slowly returning. "You think that someone might have hidden the Alpha here on earth."

Uriel nodded.

"And you want me and Novia to look into it, and probably fix everything like usual."

"More or less," Uriel said with a sigh.

"We accept!" the tall man said, beginning to rap the toe of his five hundred dollar shoe on the floor.

"Good," said Uriel getting up from the booth and making his way out of the café. When he stepped outside he looked up at the blue sky and the sun and let out a long breath that seemed to take the stamina out of him. He was going to get a headache over this, he just knew it.

## Chapter 1

About two-thousand five-hundred and forty-five years after someone wrote “In the Beginning,” the group of primates who were moderately more intelligent than the rest of the primates on earth had made some incredible advances. They developed airplanes, and cell phones, and multiple ways to reduce the entirety of their civilization to a neat little pile of ash. To keep up with this rush of technology and doomsday ordinance the primates, who by now had taken to calling themselves *Homo sapiens* without irony, needed to build cities.

Cities were places where large groups of unhappy humans could live in enormous metal and stone rectangles, and do very important things like wait in traffic and purchase overpriced coffee. However, cities were also required a great number of people doing a great number of things in order to exist at all. They need, you see, someone to order the overpriced coffee, someone to drive it to the fashionable café chains, someone to brew it, and then someone to buy it and complain about how overpriced it is. And at every step along that process there is a lot of waiting in traffic that must be done. In order to facilitate this lengthy process of coffee acquisition, humans created two remarkable institutions. The first of which was diners.

Diners were squat bland little places where humans could eat breakfast. As a rule, diners never served anything other than breakfast. Some of the more crafty diners

might be in possession of lunch and dinner menus but if their customers ever stopped to examine the dishes they ordered off of these, they would find that their meal was simply breakfast plated to appear as another kind of food. Nobody ever did examine their food of course, diners relied on rapid consumption so as to prevent customers from asking unpleasant questions like, "I wonder what the kitchen looks like," "Why does my calzone taste like an omelet," and "what is that greenish lump on my plate and why is it moving?" The diners also served the same coffee as the fashionable café chains, with the only marked differences being that the diner's coffee was much less expensive and that it was believed to be inferior to the café chain's.

Working in one of these inconsequential diners, in an inconsequential city, located in an inconsequential nation called the United States, was an inconsequential woman named Grace. She wasn't working at the diner in her own will of course. Due to the humans' strange and backwards system of education, she had to take shifts at this diner in order to pay for her master's degree in physics. She needed her master's degree in physics in order to be considered for an unpaid internship at a laboratory. And she needed this unpaid internship at a laboratory to help her gain experience to so she could qualify for a paying position. Then, once she had finally acquired a livable income, and was well into her forties, could she actually begin expanding the limits of human knowledge.



Unfortunately Grace, like most other humans, was unhappy with her lot in life. It was during the portion of the earth's circuit around the sun called summer by those in the northern hemisphere, which meant that school was at least two months off and that Grace's entire week revolved around her work. Sure, she had two days off and chess club on Wednesday evenings, but that was hardly enough time to find meaning in an existence based around serving sausage and biscuits disguised as hamburgers.

Thankfully the diner itself was not a completely intolerable place for Grace. Close, but not completely. At least it didn't require some insulting and demeaning uniform like some other establishment. Sure the cushions in the booths were leaking padding, but the floor was traditionally checkered so Grace could run through a new chess opening that she was learning. She was going to beat her friend Charlie one of these days; she just wasn't sure when that day would come.

The current workday was providing even less fulfillment than usual. It was due to this that she was able to notice the short, muscular woman wearing a "Habitat for Humanity" shirt, walk into the diner around noon, sit down at a booth, and not get up for the rest of the day. Normally the woman would have been escorted out of the diner after the second hour of continued sitting, but she kept ordering some toast or a glass of orange juice every so often, so the management was content to let her stay.

Grace would have regarded this with same dull interest that she would give to a ketchup stain on a grey wall, but the muscular woman was in her section and kept asking Grace questions whenever she checked on her table.

"How are you?" the woman asked, sitting neatly in the booth.

"Fine, I suppose," Grace said as she poured the muscular woman more orange juice. Grace was lying. She was in fact very far from fine. She had been up late the previous evening filling out scholarship applications and writing essays, and because of that she had broken seven plates that day in a sleepy daze. While breaking plates is expected in any food service facility, the sound of porcelain shattering on a tiled floor is one of the more unpleasant sounds that a human ear can experience. The breaking of the seventh plate was immediately followed by the *most* unpleasant sound a human ear can experience: being yelled at by a large, greasy man wearing a slightly less greasy apron that you are unfortunately subordinate to.

The woman looked at her as if she had just said that the sky was in fact a light shade of chartreuse.

"What do you think about the existence of the supernatural?" the she asked Grace when she brought her the toast that she had ordered.

"I'm not sure," Grace lied again. She was very sure. She was sure because when she was six she had gone on expeditions to discover monsters in her closet, attic, and under her bed. When she was sixteen she had held séances to find out if ghosts existed,

and when no ghosts appeared she got an Ouija board and tried to get herself possessed by demons. When she was eighteen she went hunting for cryptozoological creatures, and only found out that she despised camping. Now, after completing her bachelor's degree in physics she was quite certain that nothing termed "supernatural" had ever existed in the first place.

The muscular woman frowned, and looked at Grace like her face was some puzzle that had been left unsolved.

"Does life seem okay to you?" the woman asked when Grace came back to clear her dishes away.

Grace thought about giving another duplicitous response but she decided that she didn't have enough energy and said, "No, It's terrible."

The woman nodded, more satisfied this time and asked, "Why?"

Now it was Grace's turn to stare flabbergasted at the woman. Did she really not know? To Grace it was all too clear that the world was a festering mire of sadness and despair. Suddenly Grace was very suspicious of this customer's motives. This was due to her past experience with members of organizations known as "religions." Members of religions often took an overly enthusiastic interest in other people's lives in the hopes of getting them to also become members. Unfortunately for Grace, as a dissatisfied young woman who was feeling lost in the world, she was one the most preferred targets of religious people. She had received so many pamphlets, scriptures, and other

assorted literature that she had managed to fill an entire shelf in her apartment with them. She had considered throwing them out, but she had so much fun laughing at them that she could bring herself to go through with it. On any other day Grace might have played along with this woman to see if she could secure another pamphlet for her collection, but today she was determined to end this conversation before it started.

"We are the most intelligent species on the planet and yet we can't do anything right! When we aren't treating poor people like indentured servants we are using up natural resources so fast that we'll never be able to replace them. Not to mention that we seem to absolutely love enormous wars, or killing people for incredibly petty reasons. But aside from all of our leaders being generally shortsighted and impotent, and our citizens being lazy and stupid, everyone, and I mean everyone is absolutely miserable! WOULD YOU LIKE MORE CREAM IN YOUR COFFEE?"

Grace suddenly wondered why the diner had gotten so quiet. She looked around at the people staring at her as if she had just grown fifteen eyes and an external liver. The only noise came from the steady drip of grease coming off the cook.

The muscular woman, who seemed to be more surprised at the outburst than what was said, replied, "Uh, yes please. Cream would be wonderful."

The last two hours of Grace's shift paradoxically stretched out into eternity and took very little time at all. She kept herself very busy cleaning the same space on the

main counter and trying to avoid eye contact with anyone. The muscular woman remained seated at her booth, looking out the window at the throngs of people going about their various coffee and tangentially coffee-related business, and occasionally glancing at the diner's large tacky cat-clock with a put-out expression on her face.

When the cat's hour whisker reached five o'clock Grace was finally free from her shift and was allowed to exit the inconsequential diner and re-enter the inconsequential city to resume her inconsequential life. She walked a few feet up the street and stood beside a large blue sign that designated buses to stop there. A few moments later, Grace realized that the muscular woman was standing next to her.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Grace said while trying to kill the woman through sheer force of will.

"Actually no," said the woman, pushing through the icy glare, "I've been waiting on a friend of mine and he is running late as usual."

"Why annoy me then?"

"Because you look like you could use some company."

Grace opened her mouth to deny this, but she was suddenly profoundly aware that the last time she had a conversation with another person was on a bus, and that her partner had been a man who was convinced that aliens were running the world's ice cream parlors and who smelled exactly like grape jelly. She shut her mouth, and sat down on the curb.

"What's wrong?" said the woman as she sat down next to her.

What was wrong was that Grace was suffering from a condition unique to her species. The condition developed after humans were able to produce food to build their cities big enough to stop larger, scarier animals like tigers from getting in. The problem was that up until that moment humans had very clear answers to the big questions of life. If someone asked "Why are we squatting in these bushes," someone else would answer either "because want to find berries to eat," or "shut up or the tigers will hear you." That was really all humans had to think about, food and tigers. If someone ever stopped to think "why am I eating berries all the time, I don't even like berries," or "what's the point of not getting eaten by tigers," then it usually meant they weren't long for this world.

However, once the questions of Tigers and Berries were settled humans had time to ponder the stickiest question of all "what is the meaning of life?" This question was also answered in one of two ways, "to beg the invisible, all powerful sky goblins not to kill us," and "to kill those other humans over there so we can take their stuff." These weren't very good answers, and fortunately it only took the humans about 8000 years to realize this. Now with the sky goblins seeming less threatening, and killing generally frowned upon humans were back at square one, except now they had even less to worry about. Now they had mega farms to make all the berries that they anyone could ever want and they had taken care of the tigers to such a degree that they kept

them in tiny enclosures so the humans could take their screaming children to go see them. The tigers, for their part, mostly sat around and wondered where things had gone wrong.

So humans simply tried their best to distract themselves from thinking about these questions with video games and terrible novels. Unfortunately Grace didn't have time for either of these things, so she thought about the meaning of life a lot.

"And at the end of the day," Grace said after explaining all this to the woman, "it just feels pointless."

The woman was listening to this with a look of tension on her face like she was debating something with herself. Then finally the woman looked at Grace and said, "Well, what if I told you that I'm angel?"

Grace waited politely for the woman to finish her joke, but when she looked at the woman she saw nothing but total honesty. "I would say that I think I left my water running in the oven," she said beginning to slowly move away.

The woman looked confused for a moment, but said "Oh right, I almost forgot!" and suddenly light exploded out of her. When Grace was able to see again, the woman was still standing there like before, except with two distinct differences. First, the woman's eyes now looked like diamonds that scattered multi-colored light wherever she looked, and second, floating just above her head was a golden halo.

"I always forget that humans don't see me like this," the angel continued,  
"Anyway, I'm Novia. Does this help at all, Grace?"

\*\*\*

The second of institution that humans invented to facilitate their coffee based economy were Gas Stations. Gas stations were places that were primarily built so that humans could complain about how high the price of gas is and make predictions about what was causing it. These predictions could be anything from how nice everyone was treating the people who had the largest supply of melted dinosaurs to a global cabal of hyper-intelligent ocelots. Then when two people disagreed about each other's hypothesis they would get into a long, ultimately pointless, argument. It helped pass the time.

Charlie was hired to facilitate the gas station's secondary functions. This mainly consisted of directing people to the horrible bathrooms, selling surgery acid in brightly colored cans to teenagers, and ducking behind the counter when someone was robbing the place. All in all it wasn't a terrible job for a person waiting on direction for his life. Besides, he could fiddle with his magnetic chess set when things slowed down. He had to protect his winning streak from Grace.

From a young age, Charlie was very concerned about what God wanted him to do. "God" used to be one of those invisible, all powerful sky Goblins that humans used to beg not to kill them. He had gone through a few retoolings since then, and now



people begged him to not throw them into a dimension of fiery pain for eternity. This was thought to be a vast improvement.

Charlie's biggest problem was the amount of waiting that God was putting him through. Normally Charlie was a very patient individual, but right now he was having a difficult time seeing God's plan. This was because he was dealing with a terrible customer. Bad customers were the worst part of his job. At least the bathrooms didn't complain about the radio station that was playing, at least teenagers paid for their drinks before opening them, and at the very least burglars left after they had gotten what they came for. The tall, thin man in the six thousand dollar suit was guilty of all of these crimes and counting.

The man had rolled into the station in his two-hundred-thousand-dollar Mercedes about half an hour ago. He had been making Charlie miserable ever since. Charlie had been forced to listen to the all of tall man's opinions on the collection of terrible movies that every gas station carries, had to explain to the man why he couldn't purchase an entire case of peanut-butter chocolates, and had to inform him that the gas station wasn't in the habit of stocking any wine made before the year 1804.

"What good are these places if you can't find a nice bottle to drink on the road?" the tall man said while pulling out the cork of a cheap table wine.

"Sir, did you just admit that you are going to drink and drive?" asked Charlie.

"Of course! You don't expect me to take a trip while I'm thirsty?" replied the man as he took a sniff of the wine. "Ugh, why do all of these smell like spoiled vinegar? Bring me another, please."

"You... do realize that that's illegal, right?"

"Don't worry, I'll pay for all of them."

"That's not what I mean, sir," said Charlie while drumming his fingers on the Bible he had been reading before the tall man had walked in.

"Oh, are you reading that?" the tall man asked, pointing to the bible, "Man, that takes me back! I'm actually surprised that it became as popular as it did."

A wrinkle of confusion appeared on Charlie's forehead, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh right," said the man looking around as if trying to remember where he was, "Never mind about that."

"Sir, I think you need to leave now."

"Fine, fine. I'm running late anyway."

The man handed Charlie two hundred dollars but didn't take any of the opened bottles with him. He was almost out the door when the tall man stopped and turned around again. Charlie had never been so tempted to take the name of the Lord in vain.

"Actually," the tall man said looking Charlie up, and down, and up again, "I'm going to be in town in oh, say a week from now. You wouldn't happen to be doing anything next Saturday, would you?"

Charlie, for his part, was wishing to God to make an exception and let the earth swallow him up. He was absolutely certain that there was nothing that could make this situation worse. Then the doughnut shelves blew up.

Humans have a strange relationship with the chemical reactions that they call "explosions." Despite the fact that explosions can and do result in a lot of fiery, bone-shattering deaths, humans absolutely adore them. They have entire festivals where the draw is to see hundreds of tiny colorful explosions. Motion pictures are often sold on the number of different explosions that they contain. When humans learned to harness the power of explosions to propel tiny bits of metal into the soft bodies of other humans, they eventually based their entire military around the concept. It was due to the bizarre love of this chemical reaction that Charlie's first thought upon witnessing an entire shelf of baked goods being obliterated was not, "I need to duck behind this counter as quickly as possible," but was in fact "This is so cool!" This was in spite of the fact that he was only about 1.37999 inches away from being permanently blinded by a chunk of chocolate-coated confection.

The tall man had done the much more sensible thing and dove behind a rack of out-of-date magazines.

A voice crackled out from a megaphone. "Angel. We know you are in there. Come out with your wings up!"

Charlie, finally overcoming his explosion trance, realized that he was in mortal danger. He turned his head toward the window. Outside were ten people in fatigues standing by two Jeeps. Each had a helmet adorned with a large white letter "A" and were holding a gun far bigger than any reasonable person would ever need. Two of these people stood out at the front, a short, stout woman with flat brown hair, and a lanky man with curly black hair. The woman was holding the microphone. Charlie then looked over at the tall man, eyes wide with surprise.

"Don't look at me like that," the man said. "I have no idea who these people are."

"What do they want?" Charlie asked, desperately trying to remember if he had left the back door unlocked.

"You have until the count of ten, after that we are coming in there! One!" the woman's megaphoned voice sounded again.

"Oh they probably want to do any number of unpleasant things to me, it's an occupational hazard. Although I really wish they could find a better time to do this."

"Two!"

"Are they going to hurt me?" asked Charlie

"Three!"

"I don't know. Hard to tell with these types really." replied the man, peeking out from behind the magazines. "If we could only get to my car..."

"Four!"

Charlie went pale. He had always expected to die and meet his creator in heaven. He just wasn't expecting to meet him quite so soon.

"Five!"

"Wait, I've got an idea! Here, catch." the man said tossing Charlie his car keys.

"Six!"

"What do you expect me to do?" Charlie said almost dropping them.

"Seven!"

"Just put them into the ignition and the car will do the rest," the man said standing up and striding over to the door.

"Eight!"

"Yes, yes I'm glad that kindergarten wasn't lost on you," the man said sticking his head out of the door, "but before we continue this would you mind letting the cute cashier get clear?"

The woman gave a hand signal and the people in fatigues gathered together and whispered to each other. They broke, and then the woman holding the megaphone stepped forward and said, "Uh, sure, that should be all right, but no tricks angel! We're watching you."

The tall man turned to Charlie, who was trying to recite the twenty-first Psalm through chattering teeth, and held the door open for him. Charlie bravely walked out of the gas station towards the parking lot. He was stopped by the stout woman with the megaphone.

"Terribly sorry for the inconvenience," she said, with a sheepish smile, "it's our first time committing angelocide and we got a bit too excited."

"N-n-no P-problem! I'll j-just be g-g-going to m—my car now," replied Charlie, clutching his holy book as if it might actually save his life. He was almost at the sleek, jet black Mercedes, when the same man stopped him.

"Wait a second, is that a Bible?" he said to Charlie pointing book currently in his death grip.

Charlie set his jaw and stoically held out the word of God to show to the woman as any good Christian is called on to do.

"Oh! Here then, take this pamphlet," said the woman. "If you'd ever like to learn about the logical inconsistencies in your belief system then just call that number on the back."

The pamphlet was a cheaply produced, but the design on the front was quite good. The cover revealed that the group called themselves the Literally Militant Atheists, and were interested in promoting secularism, reason, and high-caliber firearms. Charlie stared down at the pamphlet for a moment, trying to process it, before

he looked back up to find the stout woman and lanky man giving an expectant but friendly smile.

“Um, yes, thank you uh-“

“I’m Mildred, and this,” she said indicating the lanky man, “is Jeremy.”

Jeremy put out his hand and Charlie took it, though any shaking he did were purely due to nervous tremors.

“P-p-p-leased to meet you. I’m Charlie,” he said, “I need to get back to me car now.”

“Alright, we’ll see you around Charlie!” Mildred said before marching back over to the rest of her people who were standing around trying to look menacing.

He fumbled a bit with the keys, but at last Charlie collapsed into the Mercedes. For a moment he considered washing his hands of the whole day and leaving the strange customer to his fate. But no, he thought, that isn't what his God would want. God would want him to save this man from all harm that his assailants would do to him, and then share the good news. The good news being that God had decided not to send everyone to the burning pain dimension; just most of everyone.

He stuck the keys into the ignition as the tall man had asked. Then, quite unexpectedly, the car began to move of its own volition. It quietly backed out of its parking space and turned toward the doors of the gas station. It shifted back and forth with such care, Charlie thought, it was almost like it was aiming- And that was as far as

his line of thinking went before the Mercedes gunned its engine and Charlie found himself in the wreckage of what was once the store.

The tall man quickly leaped out from behind his hiding spot, stopping a moment to take the latest issue of Time, and got into the passenger door.

"Nice work," said the tall man, grinning at Charlie. "Now buckle up, this might get a bit bumpy."

Meanwhile, the people in fatigues stood there stunned as their target was apparently driven away by a shrieking cashier. It took a few moments before they realized they should probably be giving chase.

Charlie, despite screaming his throat raw, was doing very well considering he was being driven by an automatic car with the worst customer he'd ever had riding shotgun.

"Oh stop screaming," said the tall man as the car merged with the evening traffic. "We're fine now. Probably."

"What is going on?" Charlie replied, not lowering his volume. "Why were those people trying to kill you, and why did they think you were an angel?"

"I told you, I have no idea! There are far too many people who want to kill me for me to keep track of, and as for the angel bit they're just flat out wrong. I'm a demon."

"You're a wha-?"



"Oh yeah that's right, we still haven't been properly introduced," said the man as his visage shifted. A charred and blackened halo appeared over the man's head, and his smile was suddenly much wider and much, much sharper than it had been, "My name is Peregrinus, what's yours?"

Charlie responded by hitting Peregrinus with his Bible.

## Chapter 2

Grace sat on the curb outside of the diner as the evening was slowly setting in. She was taking stock of her life, as one does when one's entire world view has abruptly shattered into miniscule pieces.

"So, uh, do you feel like life has more purpose now?" Novia asked.

Grace continued to stare at the angel. Maybe she was hallucinating?

"I don't know why, but usually when people find out that angels exist, they feel better," said Novia, trying to make conversation.

No, that wasn't it. Otherwise who was she yelling at in the diner earlier? Okay, so it must be a trick then. Her eyes must be contacts.

"I mean, as long as it makes people happy I'm not complain- hey stop that!"

Grace withdrew her hand. No, those were definitely diamonds in her eyesockets. Maybe the halo was attached to wires or something?

"The problem is that people changed so much in the last hundred years and I haven't completely caught- Okay what are you doing?"

Grace's hand passed neatly through the space between the golden band and Novia's head. That halo was floating. Grace took a deep breath. It was time to face up to the horrifying conclusion. "You're real," she said.

Novia winced, "Oh dear, this was a bad idea."

To be fair to Novia, revealing herself to humans had helped a lot them find their way through life in the past. However, this was back when humanity was relatively certain that dragons existed and that dumping their feces into the streets was an effective method of sanitation. The problem was that now everyone knew that dragons and other assorted mythological creatures didn't exist and they had known long enough to get used to that idea. These days if a dragon were to walk down the street to do her grocery shopping, everyone would simply assume their eyes were playing tricks on them.

"Were you always real?" Grace asked.

"Yes. Well, sort of. It's a very complicated situation, but I was around since before the earth was if that is what you mean," Novia said with the patient smile of a person who has had endless different versions of the same conversation.

"But what are you doing here?"

"Like I said, I'm waiting for a friend of mine to get here," Novia replied, watching the fading sunlight on the city buildings. "Something really important is happening, and he and I have to do something about it."

Grace's mouth turned down with distress. "But I have so many questions!"

Novia thought about this for a moment before saying, "How about this, you give me a week and when we're finished with what we need to do, I'll come back and answer every question I can."

"Oh right, you have to go the moment I want to go into the details, very convenient," Grace said, before seeing Novia's hurt expression and instantly regretting it.

"Grace, I promise that I'll come back. Please trust me, at least a little bit."

Novia had no way of knowing, but this was a painfully difficult request for Grace. She had spent most of her short adult life thinking about the existence of angels the same way she thought about the existence of a good recipe for deep sea angler fish; technically possible but so unlikely that it was barely worth considering. Now Grace had to consider that all of the evidence for her position might be wrong, and Novia was expecting Grace to wait for justification. Grace was barely able to contain her frustration, and by the way that she was twitching Novia could tell.

"Wait, I've got an idea," Novia said, standing up from the curb, "If I show you a miracle before I go, will you promise to wait?"

Grace had to think for a moment. She wanted to ask Novia more questions than an owl dosed with methamphetamine, but she also wanted to see more proof that Novia was what she claimed to be.

"Mmmmmmmmmmoookay," Grace said eventually as if the word had only barely clawed its way out of her mouth.

Novia smile seemed to actually emit light. "Alright, Grace, stand back and I'll... wait, no, I can't do that here." Novia's brow creased a bit. "Alright what if I- no, no, that's too

dangerous." She began to pace up and down the side walk, before noticing Grace's impatient expression. "Hang on I'll, uh," Novia massaged her temples a bit before smiling again and saying, "I'll stand on nothing but air!"

Grace raised a quizzical eyebrow but let the angel continue.

Novia took a few steps back onto the splash of grass near the diner, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. "Let's see now," She said to herself, "how did he say to do this? Just stick my foot out and- there we go! What do you say to that, Grace?"

Grace couldn't say anything at first. She took a few steps around Novia, and rubbed her eyes a bit but the scene didn't change. Novia, by all accounts, was standing about a foot higher on absolutely nothing. Physics, Grace's field of study and lifelong passion, had just been casually broken by a well-muscled woman outside of a diner. A giddy and somewhat perverse glee began to creep over her.

"Could you... go a little higher?" Grace asked.

Novia raised her leg to ascend another foot, when a black Mercedes came screaming around the corner and came to a halt in front of the two. The smell of sizzling rubber followed shortly thereafter. Grace had to leap back from the sidewalk and Novia had to pick herself up off the ground after losing her concentration and falling face first into the grass.

"Novia!" Peregrinus shouted from passenger's window, "Stop lying around and get in- ow! Crazy gunmen are chasing me again- ow! And this human won't stop hitting me with the King James Bible! OW!" Peregrinus' exclamations of pain were prompted by the heavy thud of an four hundred year old religious text colliding with Peregrinus' head.

"What did you do this time?" Novia asked after spitting out a traumatized grasshopper, "And why is there a human with you?"

"Nothing, I swear, and it's a long-" Peregrinus began before being unceremoniously smacked over the head again. "Would you stop that!"

"The power of Christ compels you!" said a terrified Charlie before giving the demon another heavy whack.

Grace, who had been reeling from the shock of seeing her first demon, recognized the horrified shrieks coming from the driver's seat.

"Charlie? Is that you?" she asked.

This was enough of a surprise for the poor man that he paused in his theological assault long enough for the battered Peregrinus to snatch the Bible out of Charlie's hands and toss it into the back seat.

"Grace?" Charlie said, "I thought your shift was over at five?"

This of course was not the most pertinent question that the situation raised, but humans have a fascinating talent for focusing on the most pedestrian details of the most

extraordinary issues. Among the better questions he could have asked were, "Who is this remarkably toned woman with the halo and eighty-karat eyes," or "What are the odds that I would run into my best friend from chess club on the same day I was kidnapped by a mythological entity," or possibly the best of all, "Why are we all standing around when a jeep full of armed atheistic doughnut murderers is rapidly closing in?"

But these questions had to be left unvoiced because at that moment a jeep full of armed, atheistic doughnut murderers rounded the corner, and Novia had to quickly hurry Grace into the back of the Mercedes before the people holding assault rifles could get a clear shot.

"Make sure to buckle-up back there, dear," Peregrinus said to Grace as the car pulled itself back onto the road. "It would be a terrible shame to have to scrape you off the pavement."

"What is going on?" she asked, while frantically fastening the metal buckles together.

"A group of people want to cause me and Novia grievous bodily harm," he replied.

"It's actually a pretty common occurrence for us," said Novia as the car merged into heavy traffic. "One time we had to outrun part of a defected Roman Legion because *someone* couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"Uh, guys?" Charlie said, trying to get someone's attention.

Peregrinus leaned his seat back and put his arms behind his head. "Hey we both knew that Mark and Cleo were terrible for each other, it's not my fault that Mark couldn't take sound relationship advice."

"Guys!"

"Yes?" said Peregrinus.

"That!" Charlie said frantically pointing out the rear window as a second Jeep joined the first on the downtown streets.

"Whoops, almost forgot" said Peregrinus looking up, "Hold onto something, everyone!"

"The Chase" has been part of human culture since its inception. Initially it was about either trying to run down some kind of small furry animal for food, or it was about running away from some kind of large furry animal to avoid becoming food. Eventually "the Chase" went through many permutations and around the mid-twentieth century with the advent of the automobile the "Car Chase" was officially born.

Automobiles were mechanical devices that allowed humans to move faster than their squishy meat bodies were ever intended to move. The humans took to racing these contraptions with the same short-sighted abandon that you would expect from a species whose biology still only expects to make it about forty years at most. Car



chases, however, were popularized by motion pictures and are thought of as second in importance only to explosions. A car chase might involve a number of different elements, including but not limited to: weaving between other, saner drivers, high pitched screaming, the discharge of fire-arms at the pursued vehicle, and the complete destruction of an innocent fruit stand. These features were all present in the car chase that Grace, Charlie, Novia, and Peregrinus were involved in, and they handled these with aplomb. However, there was one thing that their godless pursuers had that they were not prepared for.

"Where did they get a Bazooka at this time of year?" Peregrinus wondered aloud as the Mercedes swerved back and forth to avoid being struck by a rocket propelled grenade.

"Yeah this is weird even for us," said Novia, trying to keep an eye on where the weapon was being pointed.

Grace's eyes were roughly the circumference the grape fruit that had recently pelted the car, and she had a white knuckled hold on the overhead seat grip, while Charlie, the generator of the aforementioned high-pitched screaming, was covering his eyes with his hands out of the nonsensical belief that if he couldn't see an oncoming car it wouldn't hurt as much when they crashed into it. The Mercedes turned another corner, and took an on-ramp leading out of the city, but the Jeeps kept pace with ruthless dedication.

"I think they're getting ready to fire!" Novia said.

"Everyone brace yourselves," Peregrinus shouted, "We've never been hit by a Bazooka before so anything could happen!"

"Wait!" Grace said, breaking out of her panic induced fuge, "You're Angels-"

"Demon, actually," said Peregrinus.

"Whatever! Can't you just use your miracle powers to change their guns into flowers or something?"

Novia and Peregrinus looked at eachother.

"Can you-" Novia began.

"Checking now!" Peregrinus replied, sitting upright as his face contorted into the expression of vexed concern people wear when trying to determine if that person doing a naked Can-can in the middle distance is a relative. "What do you know," he said at last, "I can do that! Just a moment."

## Chapter 3

Meanwhile, about 30 feet behind the black Mercedes, the group of Literally Militant Atheists had lined their shot up perfectly and were getting ready to introduce their targets to their own version of fire and brimstone.

"Ready?" cried Mildred over the rushing freeway air.

"Ready!" Jeremy called back. "Firing in three! Two! ONE!"

However, just as he was about to demonstrate his superior rationality by launching a deadly explosive into highspeed traffic, he suddenly realized that he was holding a massive bouquet of seventeenth-century Damask roses. Then one of the other cars let out a shout to indicate that all of their fire-arms had been transformed into smaller bouquets of orange lilies, nasturtium, and assorted nuts. This was very distressing for a group of people who prided themselves on their certainty of methodological naturalism, and as far as they knew, assault rifles were not given to spontaneously becoming large clumps of severed plant organs. Taking advantage of their confusion, the black Mercedes pulled far ahead of them and disappeared over the horizon.

Mildred, seeing that there wasn't much point to pursuing their target waved to the other Jeep to get off the highway and regroup. When they all finally pulled into a

nondescript parking lot, the sun had set completely along with the Literally Militant Atheists' spirit.

"We shouldn't have led with the warning," said one of them. "I told you all, 'it doesn't matter how cool we look if we give the angels time to plan.'"

"Shut up, Dave," said another, "you're just angry because you didn't get to have a turn with the bazooka."

"Oh boo hoo, 'Dave didn't get to use the bazooka,'" replied someone else, "I was stuck driving the whole day. I didn't even get to shoot my assault rifle!"

While the others began to bicker, Mildred paced up and down the asphalt looking as if her favorite sports team had lost a hundred to zero on the same day that all of her milk had spoiled. The day had started off so well too! Everyone was excited to commit their first act of actual, literal militancy, and now they had completely screwed it up. It was depressing because until just recently they hadn't had anything worth doing.

Mildred Verdant was born in a compound somewhere in the vicinity of New Mexico to General Jonathan and Danielle Verdant. The Generals had absolutely no connection to any kind of military force in the United States or any other country. They just really liked to dress in uniform. The Verdants led a group known as Jesus' Special Contingent of Incredibly Violent Pacifists which they founded because of the usual combination of a self-deluding sense of grandeur, cherry-picking portions of bronze

and iron-age mythological texts, and the willful denial of reality. The mission statement of the JSCoIV was to bring about peace through the overwhelming application of violence. Most people involved saw absolutely no contradiction in this. Every day the dedicated “soldiers” of the Contingent would forgo all forms of practical or useful education to learn things like how to take the dubiously reported words of a first century rabbi at face value, how to fire, reload, and maintain a variety of fire arms, and squad based assault tactics.

Overall, the Contingent was well maintained, productive, and only occasionally had to ritually shun a member as punishment for some arbitrary crime. However, what Mr. and Mrs. General Verdant failed to account for was the insatiable curiosity of their daughter and the frequency at which she was able to sneak out to the local library. At first, Mildred’s intentions were entirely innocent. She was simply looking up arguments about God’s existence so that she could better understand the mind of her enemies in order to destroy them. However, soon she found that many of the wretched atheistic arguments made a disturbing amount of sense. Mildred, whose tenacity was unshakable even as a teenager, knew that God was testing her faith by allowing the Devil to tempt her with logical arguments, so she ventured further into her reading.

She discarded the fairly tame atheist books like, *Maybe Don’t Trust God so Much?* and *God is a Bit Rude When You Get to Know Him*, and dived right into the more controversial and aggressive *There is Literally No Physical Evidence that God Exists*, and *I*

*Could Totally Beat Up God, No Seriously, Watch This.* Finally, about half-way into *God is in Fact Dead, We Killed Him, And This Book is Me Defecating on His Grave* Mildred came to the conclusion that God wasn't real, and that she would like to experience the wider world that her parents had denied her.

After a very long conversation and emotionally draining gun battle with her parents, Mildred managed to tag her father in his bullet-resistant vest with her 9mm semi-automatic pistol. Realizing that their daughter had made up her mind, the Verdants only laid down some half-hearted suppressing fire as they tried to outflank Mildred before she could make it to her car with her luggage. Mildred understood her parents concerns and she still loved them, but she needed them to know that they couldn't control her mind or opinions so she countered by temporarily blinding both of them with a well-placed flash-bang. Eventually, Mildred got into her car and left behind her old life. She only had to wound three people in the process, not to mention the number of C4 charges she had to set to serve as distractions, so all in all things went better than she had expected.

Over the next few years Mildred had a lot of things to consider about her new life. She had rejected her parents' religion but she still really enjoyed all of the military training and tactical planning that she had learned. She made a living working various jobs at bakeries, daycare centers, and covert mercenary organizations, but she never really felt fulfillment in any of these occupations. She began to wonder if her parents

were right all along, and that there was a hole in her heart that could only be filled by Jesus and desert eagle Magnums.

These thoughts eventually followed her into a group meeting of “militant atheists” that she had decided to attend with the hopes of finding people who shared her enthusiasm for skepticism and fire-arms, and when she was inevitably escorted out of the convention hall for openly carrying an M-16 and ammunition bandolier she knew that something was wrong.

“Why should religious people be the only ones who get to form paramilitary organizations?” she had asked herself while practicing throwing her collection of combat knives. That was when it her. If a group didn’t exist, she would make one herself.

“Excuse me Ma’am,” Jeremy said to Mildred, his enormous round glasses amplifying the tiredness in his eyes to puppy-dog levels, “the troops are starting to get restless.”

Jeremy Carlton was the first person to join up with the newly-minted “Literally Militant Atheists.” Not due to any particular skeptical conviction or zealous love of heavy ordinance, but because up until Jeremy joined he hadn’t had a lot of excitement in his life. He had been born and raised in a perfectly average suburb, received perfectly average grades in school, attended a perfectly average university, and started working a perfectly average job in accounting after graduation. All of this resulted in a

higher than average desire to bend his body backwards and gnaw off his own feet for want of something more interesting to do.

He ran into Mildred when she was handing out recruitment flyers outside of his perfectly average yoga class. (He remembered that day because he had finally managed to bend his feet within chewing distance.) Mildred looked anything but average to Jeremy in her white "A" helmet and camouflage fatigues. She told him that he could affect real change in the world, learn to wield a number of incredibly deadly weapons, and best of all he wouldn't have to spend any money on prosthetic feet. Jeremy signed up right then and there.

It was quite a while before other people actually started joining up, so most of Jeremy and Mildred's first few months working together were about drumming up membership. In fact, they spent so much time getting people involved that by the time that they had enough members to call themselves an actual organization they had overlooked the one major problem; there wasn't a lot of things for atheists to be literally militant about.

At first, Jeremy thought that the solution was simple; all they had to do was march around a church or two in uniform. This idea gained a bit of traction, but Mildred reminded them that any regular group of atheists could do that. Another person suggested that they could try shooting people in the church. Mass shootings had become incredibly popular in America and a lot of people were using them to



promote their ideologies. Mildred rejected this idea too and sweetly suggested that the person who suggested it should start doing pushups until she said to stop. She reminded everyone that aside from being completely reprehensible, all they would be doing was shooting people. As Literally Militant Atheists they were against religion, not religious people.

This was the crux of their problem. While it was very easy to put bullets into the soft, squishy bodies of their fellow humans, it was much harder to put bullets into a cultural concept. Eventually, they decided to put this issue on back-burner until further notice. In the mean time, they spent their group meetings doing exercises, learning how to use their guns, and establishing an informal book club. They wouldn't find out about the existence of angels and take on their first official mission until much later, and only after a meeting with a mysterious individual.

However, upon hearing about her troops' lack of proper discipline from Jeremy, Mildred had more important things on her mind besides strange men bearing irrefutable proof of the supernatural.

"ALRIGHT MAGGOTS, FALL IN!" Mildred shouted in a thundering voice that by all acoustic laws her vocal cords should not have been able to produce.

"Yes, Ma'am!" said the rest of the LMAs, after they had formed a perfect line and stopped hitting each other with their bouquets of orange lilies.

Mildred strode up and down the line, her short, stout body slightly wobbling as she meticulously eyed each of her soldiers' postures. When she was satisfied, she stepped back and gave them a stern look. "I know today has been trying," she said at last. "We were facing an enemy that we had little to no factual knowledge of, and who we now know to be capable of completely impossible feats." Here Mildred stepped up onto one of the Jeeps and said, "However! We do know that the enemy is afraid of us."

A couple of the LMAs looked at each other. Were the angels scared of them? From their position it seemed like the angel they had been hunting was only mildly annoyed.

Mildred sighed and tapped her foot a bit before saying, "Think about it, if they weren't scared of us why would they bother to turn our guns into flowers?"

The troops hadn't thought of that while they were smacking one another with floral arrangements. It was an immensely reassuring notion, and they stood up even straighter because of it.

"That's more like it," Mildred said. "Now, our informant already told us where the angels are likely to go, so all we have to do now is to return to base, re-arm ourselves, and head after them!"

The LMA's cheered and saluted in unison. Mildred smiled proudly at her troops.

"Colonel Carlton," Mildred called.

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Open up the trunks and start distributing the chocolate chip cookies you and I baked for our first mission.”

The LMAs cheered again. If there was one thing that was better than riding in jeeps and shooting angels, it was Mildred’s cookies.

“Only one per person though,” Mildred said. “We have to save them to have with our tea during book club.”

## Chapter 4

The black Mercedes sped down the highway, a bit dented but decidedly unexploded. Charlie, still in the driver's seat and still not doing any of the actual driving, was taking very deep breaths. Grace's dark skin had turned several shades paler, and her eyes were slightly wider than was strictly possible. They also didn't seem to be blinking. All told, Grace and Charlie were handling things quite well for having had their worldviews shattered, getting shot at by a group of armed atheists, almost getting annihilated by a bazooka, and in all other respects having a very bad day. Novia and Peregrinus were entirely unfazed.

"Damask roses?" Novia asked, looking over her shoulder at the retreating atheists. "Really?"

"Milton was stuck in my head all morning and I was feeling nostalgic," Peregrinus replied as he reset his seat to a reclining position. "Why? What would you have gone with?"

"Something more in season, at least. Also, the orange lilies were mean."

"Hmm... I suppose, they were only trying to kill us. Still, they were being very rude. They thought *I* was an angel!"

Novia laughed. "Maybe they saw your performance back in 1896?"

"I was bored and harp lessons seemed like a good--"

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?" Charlie shrieked, "We could have died back there!" He looked very distressed.

"'Could have' being the operative words," Peregrinus replied, stretching his toothy smile across his face.

Novia tapped Peregrinus on the head, "Be nice. This is probably very new to them. I'm sorry, um--"

"Charlie," said Grace, finally regaining some color.

"Oh! You two know each other?" asked Novia.

"Yeah, we went to college together, and we do chess club on Wednesdays."

"Small world," Peregrinus said, finding a comfortable position and closing his eyes.

"Could we please focus on the fact that we almost got killed by a bunch of atheists with assault weapons?!" Charlie said, becoming very red in the face.

"That's a good point actually," said Novia, turning back to Peregrinus. "Why were a bunch of atheists after you?"

Peregrinus opened one eye. "Not a clue. It isn't like people have needed good reasons for wanting to kill us in the past."

"There was that one time in Machu Picchu--"

"Not my fault that the Sapa Inca was a sore loser."

"Yes but did you have to go and make fun of his hat?"

Novia and Peregrinus went back and forth like this for several minutes before Peregrinus turned to Charlie.

“Listen, can you help me settle this? Why is it that humans determine who’s in charge based on silly hats? It doesn’t make any sense to- Oh, what a *lovely* shade of burgundy you’ve turned!”

Charlie had made the mistake of trying to process the day’s events all at the same time. The human mind is a temperamental instrument. It can work through a great deal of circumstances and problems if given enough time, but it can be overloaded fairly easily. For instance, the human mind can quickly understand the concept of walruses and Broadway musicals separately. However, if a Walrus were to suddenly launch into the opening bars of Les Miserables, it would take a significantly longer time to come to grips with the situation. Walruses of course would never sing Les Miserables, because there really are only so many renditions of “I Dreamed a Dream” that a mammal can take.

Grace, on the other hand, was fairing much better because she had decided to go mad for the day, and to sort everything out in the morning. She did feel bad for poor Charlie, and so she suggested that they all might feel better if they stopped for dinner.

“Oh!” Novia said, blushing a bit. “I’m so sorry, I completely forgot that you two haven’t eaten. Peregrinus, do we have time to stop for something?”

Peregrinus stretched a bit and pulled his seat up. The sky had gone from orange to a dark blue, making the small clusters of civilization that could be seen from the highway glitter.

"Sounds good to me," he said. "I think there is a nice place somewhere around here. Whatdaya say Charles, up for some food?"

They all decided that the frustrated squeak Charlie gave meant "yes."

\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later the black Mercedes pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant. Charlie, who Grace had coaxed back into comprehensible speech, had a few precious moments of lucidity before being sent back into stunned silence.

"Oh great," Peregrinus said as he climbed out of the car, "What have I done this time?"

"This," Charlie said staring up at the restaurant's sign, "this is Le Absurdite. This is one of the best restaurants in the state!"

Novia frowned, "Please don't act impressed, he does this just to--"

"Oh really?" Peregrinus said, cutting in. "I had *absolutely* no idea that it was so prestigious."

"They book six weeks in advance; we couldn't get a seat even if we could afford anything on the menu."

"How do you know so much about local fine dining, Charlie?" Grace asked.

"I wanted to go to culinary school but I couldn't afford tuition to go to anywhere good," Charlie answered.

"I'm sorry," Novia said, patting his shoulder as they walked up to the doors.

"It's okay. It just wasn't in God's will for me to go."

"Oh, uh. Yes, I suppose that makes sense," Novia replied, trying to avoid direct eye contact.

"So how are we supposed to get a table here?" asked Grace.

"Don't worry your pretty little heads, ye of little faith," said Peregrinus, holding the door open for the rest of the group. "Just let me do the talking."

Restaurants are much like diners but differing on a few important points. Firstly, they are a great deal more expensive than diners. Second, the customers of restaurants want to enjoy the food that they order, and as such the chefs are obliged to spend a little time preparing the meals. Third, you are much less likely to contract a rare and deadly bone-melting disease at a restaurant. Consequently, restaurants are not very interesting places to eat. Le Absurdite, however, had another quality that set it apart from other dining establishments.

"Sir, not only are we completely booked for the evening," said the Maître d'hôtel, "but I should note that you are the only person who is not in violation of our dress code."



He looked at over the group gathered before him with an expression somewhere between displeasure and finding out that one has just swallowed a very large roach. While he was forced to admit that tall man in front of him was immaculately dressed, the three people behind him were respectively wearing a white tank-top and jean shorts, black work-slacks and a grease-stained blouse, and what appeared to be a gas station's uniform. The Maître d wouldn't have let them in if there had even been a table open.

"This is an outrage!" Peregrinus said, dramatically throwing his hands up, "I demand to see where in your company policy it says that."

The Maître d grumbled a bit, but pulled out the policy book that he kept under his podium. He flipped to the correct page and shoved it in Peregrinus' face. The demon screwed his face up into a look of great concentration and made many hmmm-ing noises as he read the policy book. Novia put her face in her hands. She couldn't bear to watch this again.

"Ah, there it is," Peregrinus said as he handed the book back, along with his driver's license. "If you would, please take a look at this passage here."

The Maître d quickly passed his eyes over the page with a look of pure disinterest. Then all of the color drained out of the man's face. Peregrinus' knife-tooth smile had returned by the time the poor waiter was carefully rereading the page.

A few moments later the group was being seated in a private booth, and a couple of very angry patrons in expensive evening wear were being escorted out. Peregrinus, still smiling, was being exceptionally genial to the wait-staff; Grace and Charlie were giving each other confused glances, and Novia was desperately trying to hide her face in a vain attempt to disassociate herself from Peregrinus. Meanwhile, the Maître d'hôtel was frantically looking over old copies of Le Absurdite's policy books. In every single copy since the restaurant's founding in 1943 was the same line which read thusly: Le Absurdite shall consider anyone introducing themselves as Peregrinus L. Zebub to have a permanent reservation, and they and any of their guests shall be seated immediately. Anyone caught not following this procedure shall be immediately unemployed. The poor Maître d looked back over at the tall man now being seated with his criminally underdressed companions. He could have sworn that just for a moment he saw the tall man wink at him, and a charred and blackened halo appeared over the man's head. The Maître d'hôtel decided that he would sample some of Le Absurdite's wine list that evening.

The design sensibilities of Le Absurdite could be charitably described as "none whatsoever." The art pieces that hung on the wall ranged from renditions of the Mona Lisa dressed as the Pierrot to a photorealistic portrait of a cigar with an accompanying caption reading "This is almost certainly a hippopotamus." The legs of the tables jutted

out at odd angles that began to hurt one's eyes after a few moments of observation, and the center piece of the restaurant was a fountain depicting a serious looking naked man shoving a boulder up a rocky incline; water spurted intermittently out of his armpits.

Charlie, who was now considering the trials of the day as necessary evils that allowed him to eat at such an amazing restaurant, was looking over the menu with unadulterated glee.

"Do you think I should get the Confit de canard, or the Foie gras?" he asked Grace with child-like glee.

Grace however was trying to figure out what a Cass-oo-let was and if it came with a tiny moat.

"Why not get both?" Peregrinus said, "I'm paying for it."

Charlie let out a sharp "eep."

"That goes for you too, dear," Peregrinus said to Grace, "if there's anything you'd like, please, indulge yourself."

Grace was still nervously looking over the menu when Novia tapped her on the shoulder, pointed to one of the entrées, and winked at Grace. Grace mouthed her thanks.

It was a lovely meal, all things considered. The kind of meal where one could sit down and forget that there was an entire world outside of this enclosed space of ridiculous artwork and glaring socialites. And for a while many things were forgotten.

Grace forgot that she was having dinner with things that couldn't physically exist, Charlie forgot that he was allowing a literal demon to pick up his tab, Novia forgot why Heaven ever wanted to limit angel-human contact, and Peregrinus forgot that the world might be on the brink of coming to a very abrupt end, though he probably should have kept that in mind.

A meal, however nice it may be, cannot completely wipe a person's memory. The best it can do is take the problems that memory causes and moves them over to one side so that the thought "My, what wonderful French cuisine this is," can have a little bit more room. Once that thought has left, the original problem causing memories come flooding back in followed closely by the thought, "I wonder if there is an after-dinner mint to be had around here?" Grace was the first one to return to the matters at hand.

"Angels and demons are real!" she said, surprised that she had actually forgotten this. Then immediately afterwards she followed with, "Would anyone else like to find some mints after this?"

This in turn made Charlie realize that he had just had dinner with a literal devil, and he suddenly became very concerned with ultimate destination of his immortal soul. He did however concur with Grace about the aforementioned mints.

Novia was ready with silencing gestures and shushing noises to keep the other diners from overhearing, but this only prompted even more questions from the humans.

“Are Heaven and Hell real?” asked Grace.

“What is God like?” asked Charlie.

“What processes did you use to make the universe?” Grace continued.

“Why does evil have to exist?” sounded Charlie.

“Why does God allow war to happen?”

“What is the answer to the ultimate question of life the universe and everything?”

Grace paused in her questioning to give Charlie a hard look.

“Oh what?” Charlie said, “You were going to ask them the same thing.”

Grace didn’t say anything to that. She had to think of another question now.

“Why is an angel working with a demon?” she asked at last.

Charlie also seemed to have run out of immediate questions, and just waited for an answer.

Novia and Peregrinus sat there, after weathering the inquisitorial assault. Peregrinus turned to Novia as if ceding the floor.

Novia just sighed and said, “It’s a long story.”

**To be continued... eventually... hopefully.**